

# My philosophy of education

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## Abstract

I present my philosophy of education, discuss its relevance to today's world and suggest some ways to implement it concretely.

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## 1 Introduction

Every teacher, whether consciously or not, follows a certain philosophy of education. Given that the job of a teacher is to *educate* people, one should do his best to become aware of his own philosophy of education and develop it if necessary.

In this essay I present my philosophy of education, I discuss its relevance to today's world and I suggest some ways to implement it concretely. I first state what I think should be the aims of education and I explain their importance. I then present my point of view on the nature of knowledge and of the student. In Section 4 I discuss the role of the teacher in my vision of education and finally I propose the guidelines for a curriculum consistent with my philosophy.

## 2 Aims of education

I believe that the aims of education should be:

- to increase the chances of survival for the individual [1],
- to increase the chances of survival for the community,
- to improve the life of the individual and the community.

After having pronounced such strong statements I would like to show that they are not slogans from the advertising industry, but they represent what is actually necessary and sufficient for the contemporary man and woman (and perhaps the men and woman of all ages?). Let us analyze them one by one.

Obviously education should not decrease the chances of survival for the individual, but should it be one of its aims to increase them? Survival is the basis of every human endeavor and as such it is certainly most worthwhile to focus at strengthening it. Moreover, this aim is still dramatically relevant in many places around the world, and not only in developing countries, where people have to struggle daily for survival. On the other hand, as a basic aim, to increase the chances of survival is relevant also for the citizens of developed countries, for the middle class and even for the rich. In fact even the rich and powerful can suddenly fall in disgrace if they don't carefully choose their collaborators, if they don't wisely make their investments or simply if they mishandle the situation they are in. In Hong Kong itself it's not too difficult to find examples of people driven to suicide by bankruptcy, betting losses and debts. In any case, with the expression "increasing the chances of survival for the individual" I mean to try to maximize the likelihood of being alive at any given age.

We are social beings. As a consequence it is connatural to us to want not only our own personal survival, but the survival of our relatives and friends and the community we belong to. The majority of us probably also care about the survival of any other fellow human being. Survival of the community we belong to doesn't mean simply the survival of its single members, but also the continuity of its unity, even though the bonds, the elements that unite it, may change. Is this relevant in today's world? In order to answer this question it is enough to consider the challenges that families face in most societies, including Hong Kong of course, the difficulties in cultivating friendships, the stresses among different groups within the society. From the above, my answer is yes, it is relevant.

Once good foundations for survival have been set, we usually feel other needs which, though less material, are nevertheless fundamental for our life. Among these we list the need for freedom, for peace, for harmonious social relations, the need of understanding the world, the need for the meaning of our life. For us trying to improve the life of the individual and the community means trying to meet such needs and this should be another aim of education. Is this third aim relevant today? If it were not relevant then why almost everyone, on the road, at school, in TV, on the internet, would be looking for freedom and peace? Why so many people would feel unsatisfied for not finding a meaning in their lives?

I initially said that the three aims of education are not only necessary, but also sufficient for the contemporary man's and woman's education. In the section on knowledge I provide most of the arguments in support of this position,

but I can already defend it by asking another question: “What other worthy aim is not already represented by the three mentioned above?” It is not difficult to see that the main aims of other philosophies of education can be achieved by the three aims stated above. For example the education I support would also as a consequence *nurture wise and knowledgeable persons* (Perennialism), *turn out useful and competent persons* (Essentialism), *ensure that students learn in line with interests and needs* (Progressivism), *allow students to find the meaning of life* (Existentialism) [2, 3, 4].

Regarding the demographic target of education, since the aims of education are for all, it follows that education should be for all.

### 3 Knowledge

Among the aims of education I have not listed “to transmit knowledge” or to “help people to become knowledgeable”, because I think that the construction of knowledge by an individual is both a mean to reach those aims and a consequence of them. My definition of knowledge can be expressed as follows: **the network of information and notions we build about the world and the relations among them together with the skills we have to interact with it.**

In order to increase our chances of survival and improve the quality of our lives we certainly need to form a better understanding of the dynamics of the world, which often is also a spontaneous human desire, and we need to try and know more and deeper about other individuals in our community and other communities with whom we are related. In this sense knowledge is a mean.

On the other hand longer and better lives allow us to learn more about the world we live in, including its different peoples and different cultures. In this sense knowledge is a consequence.

#### 3.1 How can it be acquired?

Regarding the mechanisms through which knowledge is acquired I share the constructivist view [5] that knowledge is not acquired from an external source, but is built or constructed by the learner throughout his/her life experiences. Any time we receive a new information, we don’t simply make a perfect copy of what the transmitter (of information) delivered, and store it on a static memory location, but we immediately try to connect it to our previous knowledge, usually without being aware of it, and if part of that information cannot be linked anywhere, that is we cannot make sense of it, it easily fades away. Thus, learning is a continuous process of search for the meaning of the individual’s experiences and of the information that reaches her or him and a continuous process of building (constructing) the relations between what the individual already knows and the new experience or information. From this point of view the knowledge itself is constituted not by the content alone, but by the relations that link skills, facts, and notions in one structure. Not only such a structure grows in time, but its links change too.

According to my perspective two elements are necessary in order for a person to learn (to construct knowledge):

- the object of learning has to be interesting to the learner (relevant to his/her life),
- the learner needs to have some previous knowledge to which s/he can link the new one.

As I will explain in the following sections, the presence of the first element can be achieved by allowing the learner to determine what is relevant for him/her, while it is the responsibility of the teacher to make sure that the new information can be processed by the learner.

### 3.2 Nature of the student

I already said that education should be for all and all includes everybody regardless of his/her strengths, weaknesses, talents and disabilities. It would be foolish to deny that differences exist, however I believe that all persons have at least three aspects in common:

- they are all intelligent in a way or another,
- they are interested in what they consider relevant to their lives,
- they are entitled to freedom and can make good use of it.

I think all students are intelligent mainly from the perspective of multiple intelligences [6]. Even severely disabled persons will try and find the way to relate with other people, being this the human nature, and this is a form of intelligence: intrapersonal intelligence. Moreover, if we had to give a more precise definition of intelligence we would say that it is **the ability to modify one's own behavior in order to improve one's own life and/or the life of the others**. And this is something that everyone has, though in different degrees.

The second aspect seems almost a tautology, but I actually mean that students are fundamentally not lazy, they are simply not interested in what they do not find relevant to their lives.

The third expresses my belief in the dignity of every person. Individuals or groups should not force choices on other individuals and this is valid also for education. The ultimate choice on what is worth studying should belong to the student. This doesn't mean that the student doesn't need advice or guidance. In fact I have written that people can make good use of their freedom, not that they will.

## 4 The role of the teacher

Since the world is dynamic and the situations every person has to face are different, it is not possible to find a teacher who has the answers for all students. Moreover, since knowledge is not imparted, but constructed, an all knowing teacher who broadcasts his/her wisdom would be of little use anyway. According to my philosophy of education **a teacher should be a more experienced learning partner** for the students. As partners, teachers and students learn together. In fact it is my experience that any time I prepare a learning activity, trying to put myself in the perspective of the students, I learn something

new even with regard to my own field of expertise. Naturally partners are not necessarily equal; one may be more skilled in one aspect, the other more knowledgeable in a certain field. What teachers usually have more than students is life experience and knowledge or skills in a specific area. These should be used to provide direction in case of need and to provide information in case the students ask for it.

## 4.1 Pedagogy

As a consequence of the constructivist view of learning and of the nature of the student, in order to reach the aims I proposed, the most suitable pedagogical approach is to base all learning activities on the enquiry and discovery methods [7]. Such an approach does not exclude moments with more traditional forms of teaching, but such moments should originate from a need that the student discovered after having investigated a problem, a situation or an issue. For example students investigating the conservation of total energy in nature will probably find the need to define the mathematical concept of integral. After defining it and finding out the basic method of calculation they may want to learn more methods and tricks even though these may not be strictly necessary in the present moment. In such a case some lecture and drilling sessions become natural.

I can anticipate the likely criticism to my proposal regarding the fact that by adopting such a radical approach I am not taking into account the cognitive and metacognitive differences among learners and I am excluding those who learn better by simply following the instructions of the teacher. To this objection I respond by noting that, the students' expectation that teachers (or schools) should tell them what they need to know and provide it, is not inborn, but it is instilled to them by the education system. Learners, incorrupted by this habit, would be naturally inquisitive, at least with regard to what they are interested in. In any case, as I already mentioned, the enquiry and discovery approach should at least provide the spark for varied learning activities which meet the needs of all learners.

The learning approach I propose is evidently difficult to implement in a traditional setting with a predefined timetable for all students. However it is not impossible to apply if we are willing to radically change the system. One way to put it in practice could be to associate every student with a teacher (but a teacher can be associated with many students) who acts as the experienced partner by giving guidance and emotional support and let the student choose the topics or issues he needs to study or the skills he needs to learn on a monthly basis, for example, so as to gradually define his own curriculum. Obviously the whole yearly plan should be different. For example instead of having a course on algebra in the first term and a course on geometry in the second, both should be available throughout the year in order to meet students' needs. This requires an extremely flexible organization which is possible only if certain elements of the traditional curriculum, e.g. the selection and certification function of examinations, are eliminated, as I will discuss in the section on curriculum.

Another fundamental requirement is that the teacher-student relationship grow in mutual trust and confidence. The prejudice that students are lazy and the impression that teachers are hypocrites or unfair are incompatible with the implementation of my educational philosophy.

## 5 Curriculum

In a wide sense the curriculum is the whole body of experiences made, relationships built, acquired notions, learned skills and knowledge formed during the process of education. From the more specific point of view of the school system we can look at it under four aspects: content, skills, attitudes and assessment.

Before discussing them one by one it is important to notice that a natural consequence of the philosophy of education I am presenting is an interdisciplinary curriculum, because for example while studying the Renaissance and the influence of Galileo's discoveries on that historical period, if a student wants to know what's so special about Galileo's thinking or how a telescope is made and why it was not invented before, we cannot just say: "You will study this next year in the physics course, it's not in the history syllabus". We need to give the student the possibility of investigating those questions, e.g. with the method described in the previous section, and we need to collaborate with other subject teachers so as to present to all students a more complete picture of an issue.

### 5.1 Content

The content to be studied should be chosen by the students according to their needs. To me it is apparent that this cannot have any relevant negative side-effect on learning. On the contrary it would dramatically improve the learning attitude, increase the amount of knowledge that is retained in the long term and reduce the huge amount of time wasted by teachers trying to force-feed students things that are usually forgotten shortly after the examination, if ever learned. After all, of any subject studied in secondary school how much specific information has the reader retained during her life?

My philosophy does not exclude however that the teachers, as more experienced partners, and the parents suggest or even require the students to study some very fundamental topics related to language, mathematics and civic education. The main point is to do in such a way that the students perceive that the school requirements correspond to real needs in human life and are not artificial rules created only to propagate a tradition, to maintain certain job positions and to control the development of the society.

### 5.2 Skills

I believe that in life the most useful general skills are **analytical skills** and **inquiry skills**. Consistently with the aims of education and my position with regard to knowledge, the whole curriculum should be centered around these two skills. This can be more easily achieved by drastically reducing the importance of the quantity of the content, as implied in the previous section, and by allowing ample time to students to ask, discuss, research, analyze.

In addition, great importance should be given to **skills specific to jobs** a student is interested in, even if naturally the interests of a student will change in the process of her development. The stress on job skills should not be intended in the sense of the so called "vocational education", in contrast to "academical education". On the contrary it should be viewed as a response to the natural interest of the students in learning at least the basics of some job.

### 5.3 Attitudes

I am confident that the curriculum I am proposing can help the students to:

1. develop a strong commitment to honesty,
2. develop respect for others as self,
3. feel the importance and the freedom of expressing own ideas,
4. feel the importance of others' ideas,
5. learn that knowledge is built together.

The above five attitudes towards oneself (1 and 3), others (1, 2, 4 and 5) and the world in general (5) are necessary for improving the life of the individual and the community. With regard to the commitment to honesty I do not only refer to money or career affairs, but also to intellectual honesty which includes being able and accustomed to acknowledge own mistakes.

Attitudes cannot be taught, but are learned through experience. The curriculum, centered on the learner, involving a constant, active, interaction between students and teachers and requiring the student to continuously take decisions and construct her own knowledge should provide the suitable experience to develop the attitudes I listed above.

### 5.4 Assessment

The traditional, examination based assessment, aimed mainly at selecting and certifying the ability in passing mainly artificial tests have very little relation with students' ability to address the problems they need to face in life, both at the practical and the intellectual levels and yet they constitute the single most influential element in our schools. Experience and reflection lead us to conclude that no compromise is possible on this issue if this philosophy of education has to be applied; selection and certification must be erased from the functions of schools. For this purpose there are vocational, professional, graduate and postgraduate courses and new institutions can be created based on needs. Such certification courses should be completely independent from general schools and available for students after the general primary and secondary education.

During primary and secondary education a suitable form of assesment could be portfolio-based assessment in which the portfolio is assessed from the point of view of the many skills that a student can acquire and in which such skills are evaluated with grades (not marks). After each assessment a student should have the chance to improve his/her portfolio from the point of view of the skills which are lacking or not so good if he wants to do so. Of course if a student chooses to do so, this will require an extra investment in time in her studies, but at the end both student and the society know "what they have learned".

## 6 Conclusion

My philosophy of education is based on the reflection on two main concepts: the aims of education and the nature of knowledge.

From personal experience and observation I conclude that the only three aims for which it is worthy and necessary to develop an education system are: to increase the chances of survival for the individual, to increase the chances of survival for the community, to improve the life of the individual and the community.

These aims however cannot be achieved without a correct (experimentally correct) vision of the nature of knowledge and of the student. I think that the constructivist view of knowledge well describes the cognitive processes that occur in the learner. As a consequence of this view I suggest that: students should be free to choose what they need to learn, teachers should be more experienced learning partners, the central elements of the curriculum should be analytical and inquiry skills, the selection and certification role of schools should be removed.

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